

Making Facebook Personal

By Ryan Teague Beck
Roll Call Staff
July 26, 2011

Politicians on Facebook are often little more than caricatures.

On official pages run by legislative staffers, they come off as wooden and dry Dudley Do-Rights touring the state fairgrounds.

On campaign pages managed by paid political strategists, they are hard-charging partisans, forever storming the barricades.

But on his Facebook page, Rep. Brad Miller (D-N.C.), 58, comes off as a regular person — like he could be your slightly wonky and sarcastic roommate from college.

It's not an official page, just a regular one like the rest of us use. Instead of fans, he has friends, and he writes his own status updates about buying clothes and watching TV.

Like this one from July 15: "I just bought a couple of new ties and I realized that ties are now the skinniest they've been since John Kennedy was President, making all of my ties dated. I blame Mad Men."

Or this one from July 3: "I'm drinking a beer, eating a steak, and watching [an] old Bond movie on Sleuth. I'm sure if I was paying closer attention I would know why he was wearing a tuxedo."

Miller says his staffers actually signed up for the social networking site when he was running for re-election in 2008. At first, they posted for him, but after a while, he decided to take over the account.

"I don't think I ever decided. I just started doing it," he says. "It's not like there was a plan here. ... I read the kinds of things other people post and kind of followed suit."

Technically, Miller's staff set up the account incorrectly at the start. Politicians and other public figures are supposed to use "fan pages," a special type of Facebook page that allows other users to become "fans" but does not give the same direct access that a "friend" has. (You're also limited to 5,000 friends but can have unlimited fans.)

The official Facebook pages for Members of Congress have become a popular way to connect with constituents. More than 400 Members now have a fan page, and they've become so popular that the House recently had to issue new rules on franking to regulate how they are used.

Miller's staff eventually realized its mistake, and he set up a fan page, run by his campaign, that now has more than 1,800 fans. It's updated infrequently and mostly features information about fundraisers and other campaign events.

But his personal page is more popular — with more than 2,600 friends — and more interesting.

Every morning, Miller, who serves on the Financial Services Committee, spends an hour on his Dell computer reading his favorite blogs on economics ("Calculated Risk," "Economist's View," "Naked Capitalism"), major newspapers and magazines (the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal) and online outlets (Project Syndicate, the Huffington Post).

He then usually posts a link to his Facebook page with a pithy, somewhat snarky comment.

Like this one from Thursday on a New York Times article about freshman Republicans who support federal spending in their own districts: "They're going to stop the out-of-control spending in other Members' districts!"

Or this one from July 17 on an item from Times' columnist Paul Krugman's blog post about problems setting up the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau: "Paul Krugman is sad. So am I."

Or this one on a link to video of a floor speech about a proposal to change how Medicare works from Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.): "I want to thank anyone younger than 55 who is willing to pay taxes for the rest of your working life so I can get full Medicare benefits, when all you'll get is a pissant little voucher for private insurance. I think you're a chump, but I appreciate your generosity."

It's not unusual for Miller to be this outspoken. He has a sharp-tongued blog on the liberal website the Daily Kos that he infrequently updates. (His most recent post, from April, is a breezy recounting of how he got into Columbia Law School by way of criticizing Donald Trump. He jokingly uses the phrase "cracker quota" in describing what some might think of the school's policy on diversity.)

Still, he says his staff is not entirely excited about his Facebook musings.

"I think they wake up every morning with trepidation to see what I've written," Miller jokes.

One thing he says staffers don't have to worry about: the kind of social networking that former Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) engaged in on Twitter with young female fans.

For one thing, he says, he's not technologically adept enough to post a photo on Facebook. But Miller, who is divorced, also says he's not interested.

Because his page is a personal one, and not a fan page, Miller's friends can send him emails through Facebook. A few have written asking about veterans' benefits or other problems. But a few have written unusually personal emails.

"There are a few perfect strangers who worry me a little bit," he says. "I think it might be an Anthony Weiner-like setup to draw me into something that would be politically embarrassing, so I obviously avoid that. And it's not my nature."

Miller also vets his friends. If he sees a friend request from someone who has listed that they also like conservative commentator Glenn Beck, for example, he doesn't accept. And he's unfriended people who personally criticize him.

"Somebody posted in a comment that we'd all be better off if I just played golf," he says. "That's not adding to an enlightening debate."

Mileah Kromer, an assistant professor of political science at Elon University in North Carolina, says Miller's approach to Facebook is unusual for a Member of Congress.

Kromer, who has studied how state legislators use Facebook, says most of them update their own pages because they don't have the staff to do it for them, unlike their Congressional counterparts.

After looking at hundreds of pages, she says she can usually tell which ones are staff-written and which ones, like Miller's, are done by the politicians themselves.

"It really is quite obvious to me that he is the one updating his page," Kromer says. "You can tell a stark difference from Members of Congress who use a staffer to update it with very vanilla commentary that anyone could have written."

She says that as more state legislators make their way to Congress, the trend will shift toward

more pages like Miller's. Writing a good status update might be seen as a skill, like speaking on the stump or handling a TV interview, that politicians are required to have.

Miller says he doesn't think that far ahead. For now, he is focused on a difficult re-election campaign caused by redistricting changes in North Carolina. He doesn't think too much about how his personal Facebook account will play into that either.

"I basically use Facebook the same way that most other Americans do," he says.